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ABSTRACT

Because of the economic and cultural changes that are currently taking place in society and the workplace, many adults who had their career and personal lives planned to retirement are finding those plans no longer viable and are recognizing the need to readjust their career expectations. Many adults who had always viewed life as a linear, steadily upward-progressing process are now finding their lives taking a more cyclical course marked by a series of transitions. Many adults get lost in the transitions from one life structure to another; however, many others find that a cyclical view of adult life promotes self-renewal. Although transitions are difficult, all transitions follow a predictable pattern and, consequently, adults can be trained to anticipate and facilitate them. Overcoming fear of the unknown and recognizing when change is necessary are two key steps in successful negotiation of change. A number of publications that have analyzed strategies for helping adults in their quest for career satisfaction, mastering self-renewal, and channeling self-renewal efforts into career survival and development are reviewed. (MN)

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Career Development through Self-Renewal

by Bettina A. Lankard

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A young married mother decides to give up her prestigious full-time job with a Big 8 accounting firm and do consulting part time out of her home so she can spend more time with her baby. A 38-year-old chemical analyst with a research company decides to start his own business when he encounters roadblocks to his career advancement. A man in his fifties chooses to retire from the university after 20 years and join a small company as training director when he finds himself increasingly disillusioned with his changing faculty role. A woman in her late forties decides to leave her role as full-time homemaker, return to school, and pursue a job as a nurse. These adults experienced discomfort in their life situations, which propelled them to reconsider their careers and readjust their career expectations. Learning how to move from situations we consider negative to positive ones is an outcome of self-renewal. This *Digest* examines several perspectives on life cycles and change and presents strategies for negotiating change through self-renewal. It suggests a process for applying these strategies to career development.

Changing Career Expectations

Economic and cultural changes in society, technological and organizational changes in the workplace, and changes in business operations–management processes and customer orientations–are creating frustrations for many workers. Adding to frustrations from external changes are frustrations caused by the internal changes in personal needs, values, and life events. Many adults who had their career and personal lives planned to retirement are finding those plans no longer viable and are recognizing the need to readjust their career expectations as a means of satisfying their needs for work and love–the two domains viewed by Freud as essential to healthy, mature adulthood (Merriam and Clark 1991).

Changing Life Views

Many people have a linear view of life, especially those whose lives to date have paralleled their desires. These individuals see life as progressing steadily upward through hard work and perseverance. Because they subconsciously (or consciously) believe that good works and deeds will lead to success and happiness, they are not prepared for the unexpected events that interfere with their life plans. The cyclical view of life suggests that there is a time for everything–that patterns are repeated but have different meanings at different times in our lives and that the challenge is to move through these patterns with grace. A cyclical view of adult life promotes self-renewal. It is characterized as follows (Hudson 1991, pp. 43-44):

- It portrays life as a complex, pluralistic, varied flow, with ongoing cycles in nature, societies, and people.
- It assumes that life "develops" through cycles of change and continuity rather than in progressive, straight lines.
- It portrays human systems as flexible, interactive, and resilient, permitting continuous adaptations.
- It considers continuous learning to be essential to the constant improvement of adult competence.

The cyclical view demands that adults let go of old, outmoded habits and learn new ways to live effectively. It recognizes that "adults need not only knowledge and training to make the changing external world work but self-knowledge and training to make the internal world effective" (Hudson 1991, p. 44).

Most adults today can identify with the cyclical view of life. They have been touched by significant life events regarding jobs, family, and health. They have established one life structure only to find they must move to a new life structure. It is in the transition from one life structure to another that many get lost.

Negotiating Change

Transitions are difficult, often because they are necessitated by circumstances that are beyond our control and not of our own choosing. Hudson (1991) proposes that all transitions follow a predictable pattern and that adults can be trained to anticipate and facilitate them. He suggests that the first step toward making a transition is recognizing and accepting that transition is necessary and has positive functions. "Many would say that it is better to do your best to make a worn out, dysfunctional life structure work and to tough it out than to face a life transition. That very attitude, erroneous as it is, keeps thousands of people locked into life structures that have died and into routines that are lifeless" (ibid., p. 95). When change is viewed as positive, the door to self-renewal is opened.

Another step toward transition, possibly the most difficult one for adults, is overcoming fear of the unknown. Hudson quotes E. Y. Siegelman, who portrays the dilemma created by fear of change:

> Being stuck, being depressed is awful. But it's safe. It's like walking around in the dark in a familiar room which may be ugly and drab but is familiar. But when you change–when you take a risk or do something that's way out of character for you–it's different. It's like being thrust in the dark into a furnished room that is unfamiliar. This is probably a more interesting room, one you may get to like because it's going to be all yours. But the furniture is strange. You don't know where anything is yet. You might bump into something; you might trip and fall. (p. 99)

Making life choices takes courage: courage to change, courage to learn, courage to make mistakes. "People who avoid choosing and float along on possibilities–trying to avoid the pain of making mistakes–are committing a big error in judgment. In their fear of the future and of the tasks of adult life, they are refusing to live fully" (Hardin 1992, p. 133).

Knowing when change is necessary for well-being and a sense of fulfillment requires honest reflection and self-assessment. In their personal lives, reflective adults examine their changing roles as spouses, lovers, parents, children of aging parents, citizens, and volunteers as they strive to combine and learn from the two elements of love and work. In their work lives, reflective adults assess their careers and consider new options in a job market characterized by unexpected layoffs due to downsizing and government cutbacks, the introduction of new technologies that require new skills, new management patterns that require teamwork and customer orientation, and the diversity of the work force. In deciding whether there is a need for change or transition, it is helpful to consider the following questions (Hardin 1992, p. 10): What will probably happen if I continue this path? Is that what I really want for myself? Am I ready to accept the consequences of what I am choosing, for both myself and others?

Three strategies to help adults in their quest for career satisfaction are presented by Stevens (1991, p. 144):

1. Analyze the current situation. Consider changing expectations, expected and unexpected events, aging, expectations of others, burnout, redundancy, midcareer crises, and other qualities or situations that influence staying in or altering your current situation.
2. Consider ways to resolve job dissatisfaction. Consider risk taking, stress, promotions, ambition, career plateau, financial appraisal, work and leisure, and job requirements and tasks.
3. Determine what you want to do. Engage in self-assessment, goal formation, information gathering, and decision making.

Planning a life transition requires that we "**hold on** to what is working, **let go** of what is not working, **take on** new learning and exploration of options, and **move on** to new commitments. All four of these are normal and necessary for growth and development" (Hudson 1991, p. 98).

Mastering Self-Renewal

Managing the change cycle is a self-renewing process. It empowers adults to be self-confident and generative. Generativity is defined by Hardin (1992) as a process whereby we learn to follow our deeper interests and longings and bring about change. It helps us to "avoid the dangers of self-absorption and stagnation because we learn to live in new ways that expand our horizons" (p. 28). Hudson (1991) presents 10 skills for managing the change cycle, pointing out that "each skill has a time in the cycle when it performs a critical function but that all 10 are important at all times because to some degree parts of our lives are simultaneously at various places in the cycle" (p. 68):

1. Visioning or dreaming the plan. The dream or vision is the "driving force for the life structgure, a source of passion and values. The plan is the plot for making the dream happen" (p. 72).
2. Launching. Launching puts the plan to action; it requires "commitment and personal mission" (p. 78).
3. Plateauing. Plateauing is the "art of sustaining a successful life structure. . . . It is knowing how to keep enriching the dream/plan for as long as it makes sense to do so" (p. 81).
4. Managing the doldrums. This requires coming to terms with "decline, negative emotions, and feeling trapped in an increasingly dysfunctional life structure" (p. 69).
5. Sorting things out. Choosing "what to keep, what to eliminate or change, what to add, and how to proceed into a revitalized life structure" is the task of this step of the change cycle (p. 69).
6. Ending a life structure. This requires an ability to say farewell with gratitude and clarity, which frees you to consider your next options.
7. Restructuring. This minitransition can be used if the life structure could be improved through some specific changes.
8. Cocooning. The transition into a new life structure requires "turning inward to take stock, to find your own basic values, and to disengage emotionally and mentally from the former life structure" (p. 69).
9. Self-renewal. Following successful cocooning, this step involves a rebirth of self-esteem, a reevaluation of core issues and beliefs, and the recovery of hope and purpose.
10. Experimenting. Creativity, learning, risk taking, and networking give one a sense of purpose and power in creating a new life structure.

Self-Renewal for Career Development

Finding meaning in our work is critical if we are to avoid stagnation and boredom (Bergquist et al. 1993). It is the responsibility of each individual to effect the change necessary to reinvent work so that it has personal relevance. Companies are requiring that employees take responsibility for their own careers. Grossman and Blitzer (1992) suggest strategies for career survival: (1) honest assessment of self and skills; (2) motivation and drive to establish and pursue a goal; (3) awareness and knowledge of the strategic challenges of business in the 1990s (e.g., improving quality and customer service); and (4) establishing an action plan that is built upon realistic expectations and that draws upon available resources, both within and outside the company.

Being able to accomplish successful career transitions within an existing organization/life structure or a new organization/life structure requires personal motivation. Successful transition is linked with one's sense of autonomy or internal locus of control, and manifested in a willingness to learn and a positive attitude. It is the force that propels individuals to take the initiative in directing their own lives and careers.

Many people find value in their work as a source of new learning and challenge. "They return to school, enter training programs, or enroll in workshops and seminars to keep up to date in their current jobs or strike out on their own" (Bergquist et al. 1993, p. 122). Others, hampered by lack of drive, fear of failure, or reluctance to exit company retirement plans by terminating employment, stay in unsatisfying and/or stressful jobs. Bergquist et al. ask if the sacrifice is necessary or worthwhile. "When does the time come for us to cease deferring gratification for the future and begin actually living the fabled future?" (p. 125). Whatever their age, adults must find meaning and community in their work if they want to be generative and alive. Therefore, they must look toward continued opportunities to "reinvent work as a central part of reinventing themselves" (p. 135).

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